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SUBJECT: A/S DEWEY DISCUSSES POPULATION, FAMILY, AND  
CHILDREN POLICY WITH GVN

REF: Hanoi 2047

1. (U) Summary: In discussions with A/S Dewey, National Committee for Population, Family, and Children's Affairs officials stressed that GVN policies guarantee and respect the right of citizens "freely and responsibly to choose the size of the family." At the same time, they said, GVN policy also emphasizes the responsibility of the entire society to carry out family planning and population tasks. Population policy focuses on propaganda and education so that people will make the right decisions on family size. Officials stated that there is no doctrine, law, or policy applying fines or incentives to families on the basis of family size, and that the GVN regards giving birth as a fundamental human right. A/S Dewey said that the USG wants to work with Vietnam using the voluntary/informed choice approach. End Summary.

2. (U) A/S Dewey, EAP/BCLTV Desk Officer Charles Jess, Charge Porter, and Poloff met with National Committee for Population, Family, and Children's Affairs Vice Chairman Phung Ngoc Hung on August 14. Also on the Vietnamese side were Nguyen Van Tan, Chief of the Executive Office; Ta Thanh Hang, the Deputy Chief of the Department of International Cooperation; Pham Ba Nhat, the Chief of the Population Department; and Le Do Ngoc, the Chief of the Family Department.

#### COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

3. (U) A/S Dewey said he had heard positive things about population issues in Vietnam and was interested in hearing from the officials responsible. Vice-Chairman Hung welcomed A/S Dewey on behalf of the committee and explained that the committee was new, having been created in August 2002 by the merger of the Committee for Family Planning and Population and the Committee for the Protection of Children. He noted that the Chair of the committee (Ms. Le Thi Thu) is a member of the cabinet, and also a minister. The reason the Committee is not itself called a ministry is that the Committee also includes the deputy ministers of Justice, Health, Education, and Public Security. "Many" mass organizations also assist the committee, and the deputy chiefs of those organizations are also members of the committee, he added. The Committee employs a total of about 300 cadres.

#### NOTABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

4. (U) Vice chairman Hung said that, while the GVN had been trying to control population growth since 1961, it had only been successful since 1993. According to Hung, the birth rate had fallen from 3.8 children/woman of childbearing age in 1989 to 2.2 in 2003. In addition, he noted, the number of children desired by women of childbearing age in 1988 was 3.3, but fell to 2.4 in 2003. The Vice chairman attributed the success of the program to the efforts and commitment of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and mass organizations under the Vietnam Fatherland Front, and noted the assistance of other countries, especially NGOS from the United States.

#### CONTINUING CONCERNS

5. (U) The Vice chairman expressed his concern that the situation in the Central Highlands, among ethnic minorities, and in the mountainous northwest was not improving as rapidly as in other parts of the country, however. In contrast to the national average, the number of children of woman of childbearing age in the mountainous regions was 3.4. In the Central Highlands specifically it was 4.3. The consequences of this, he said, was increased migration to the major cities from these more heavily populated and poorer areas. The Committee intended to address the problem by focusing on the Population Ordinance ratified in February 2002 and which came into effect on May 1, 2003. (reftel)

#### THE POPULATION ORDINANCE

16. (U) Hung emphasized that the ordinance's basic principles guarantee and respect the right "freely and responsibly to choose the size of the family." At the same time, the law declares the responsibility of the entire society to carry out family planning and population tasks. The GVN, Hung said, continues to encourage people to have small, healthy families so they can avoid hunger and illness. The GVN also emphasizes to families that smaller family sizes enable better prenatal care and healthier children.

17. (U) In response to A/S Dewey's question regarding incentives or penalties for families having more or less children, Hung stated that there was no doctrine, law, or policy in Vietnam applying fines or incentives to families on the basis of family size. The GVN, he emphasized, regards giving birth as a fundamental human right. Population policy focused on propaganda and education so that people would make the right decisions on family size. In Vietnam, he added, independent and social organizations elicited family commitments to have only one or two children. Chief of the Population Department Pham Ba Nhat added his own personal experience, noting that he himself had three children, and that neither he nor his family faced any sanction or harassment. Nhat observed that "here and there" the media might report differently, but that the GVN was dedicated to a policy of "awareness and voluntarism" to control population. He said that many World Bank experts and American experts had visited villages and communes where family planning projects were underway. These experts completely supported the extension of the projects to other areas, he stressed. (Note: Le Dinh Phuong, the head of the International Cooperation Department, made a similar point the previous evening at a reception at the Charge's residence. When asked about Vietnamese population policy, he declared that coercive measures were "totally ineffective" and "no longer" used in Vietnam. Tran Tien Duc, Country Director of POLICY Vietnam -- a Vietnamese NGO and USAID partner -- agreed. End note.)

#### CHILDREN'S ISSUES -----

18. (U) Le Do Ngoc, the Chief of the Family Department, stated that Vietnam was the first in Asia (and the second in the world) to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. After the ratification, he added, Vietnam had issued two laws: the first was on the universalization of primary education, and the second was on the protection and care of children. Of greatest concern now, he said, was the protection of "special children," including homeless children and the disabled. He explained that the rights of children to care, education, entertainment, and opinions were assured by the population, families, and children system. Most children in Vietnam could go to school, he said, and were covered under the immunization program. Ngoc admitted greatest challenges in mountainous and remote areas, including the Central Highlands, but said that the GVN was dealing successfully with children's problems in those areas thanks to funding and technical assistance from international organizations and "from the United States."

19. (U) Ngoc stated that in the 20 years he had been working on the issue of children's welfare there had never been as much government attention, but the issue had never been as complicated as it is now. In the past, he said, the country was poor but the children were all right. Now, he said, the country was richer but the children had more problems. He listed several, including:

- Children from the countryside living on the street in the cities;
- 300,000 children disabled from contact with toxic chemicals;
- Children who had contacted HIV/AIDS;
- Children without parents, or from divorced families;
- Children who were in accidents and were disabled;
- Children who fled the flooded Mekong region to come to Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi.

To resolve these difficult issues, Vietnam needed resources and technology, Ngoc said. He said he hoped Vietnam could call on U.S. experience to help resolve these problems.

10. (U) A/S Dewey praised the Committee's presentation as encouraging and clear, noting that the GVN's stated population policies indicated that the emphasis in Vietnam is on informed choice, the rights of women, and the right to choose the number and spacing of children. Dewey said he hoped that other countries that have coercive policies would review Vietnam's record and learn from Vietnam's lessons. The USG, he said, wanted to work with Vietnam using the voluntary/informed choice approach. A/S Dewey added that the USG was in negotiations with China regarding the return of the U.S. to the UN Population Fund, and that, if successful, many countries -- including Vietnam -- would benefit.

11. (U) COMMENT: The GVN's population policy and the commitment of its senior officials are clearly against coercive measures to control population. Propaganda efforts and local peer pressure are the preferred solution, although the references to occasional reports of abuses at the local level suggest that peer pressure may sometimes cross the line into coercion. Still, reports of coercion are relatively rare and it seems reasonable to take the GVN's description of a voluntary/informed choice approach at face value. End comment.

12. (U) A/S Dewey did not have a chance to clear this message before departing.  
BURGHARDT